

# Promoting Lifelong Healthy Eating

## An Overview

*Most young people in the United States make poor eating choices that put them at risk for health problems. Establishing healthy eating habits at a young age is critical because changing poor eating patterns in adulthood is difficult. Schools can help young people improve their eating habits by implementing effective policies and educational programs.*

### BENEFITS OF HEALTHY EATING

- Helps young people grow, develop, and do well in school.
- Prevents childhood and adolescent health problems such as obesity, eating disorders, dental caries, and iron deficiency anemia.
- May help prevent health problems later in life, including heart disease, cancer, and stroke—the three leading causes of death.

### CONSEQUENCES OF UNHEALTHY EATING

- Hungry children are more likely to have behavioral, emotional, and academic problems at school.
- Research suggests that not having breakfast can affect children's intellectual performance.
- Poor eating habits and inactivity are the root causes of overweight and obesity. The percentage of young people who are overweight has almost doubled in the past 20 years.
- Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia—which can cause severe health problems and even death—are increasingly common among young people.
- Poor diet and inactivity cause at least 300,000 deaths among U.S. adults each year.

Percentage of Young People  
Who Are Overweight\*



\*Overweight defined by the age- and sex-specific 95th percentile of body mass index (1963-70 data).  
Source: Troiano RP, Flegal KM. *Pediatrics* 1998;101(3):497-504.



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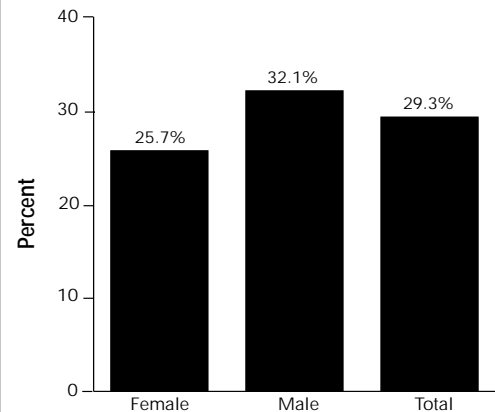
## EATING HABITS OF THE NATION'S YOUTH

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- More than 84% of young people eat too much fat, and more than 91% eat too much saturated fat.
- Only one in five young people eats the recommended five daily servings of fruits and vegetables. Fifty-one percent of children and adolescents eat less than one serving a day of fruit, and 29% eat less than one serving a day of vegetables that are not fried.
- The average calcium intake of adolescent girls is about 800 mg a day, considerably less than the Recommended Dietary Allowance for adolescents of 1,200 mg of calcium a day.
- One in five students aged 15–18 regularly skips breakfast.
- Thirteen percent of high school girls vomit, take laxatives, or take diet pills to lose or keep from gaining weight. Harmful weight-loss practices have been reported among girls as young as 9 years old.

Percentage of High School Students Who Eat Five or More Servings of Fruits and Vegetables a Day,\* by Sex



\*Ate five or more servings of fruit, fruit juice, green salad, or cooked vegetables on the day preceding the survey.  
Source: CDC, National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1997.

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## THE OPPORTUNITY

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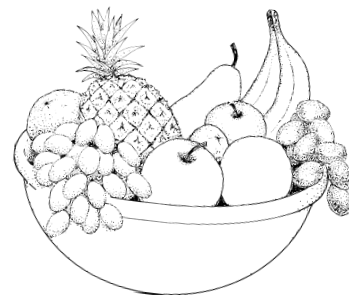
Schools are ideally suited to give children and adolescents the skills and support they need to adopt healthy eating behaviors for life.

- More than 95% of all children and adolescents aged 5–17 are enrolled in school.
- Schools can offer many opportunities for young people to practice healthy eating.
- Teachers and food service personnel can contribute their expertise.

### What is healthy eating?

*Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, gives the following advice:

- Eat a variety of foods.
- Balance the food you eat with physical activity.
- Eat plenty of grain products, vegetables, and fruits.
- Choose a diet that is
  - Low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
  - Moderate in sugars, salt, and sodium.



# CDC's Guidelines for Schools to Promote Lifelong Healthy Eating

In collaboration with experts from universities, state and federal agencies, voluntary organizations, and professional associations, CDC has developed guidelines to help schools implement effective nutrition policies and educational programs. *Guidelines for School Health Programs to Promote Lifelong Healthy Eating* is based on an extensive review of research and practice.

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## KEY PRINCIPLES

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The CDC guidelines state that school-based nutrition education programs are most likely to be effective when they

- Help young people learn skills (not just facts).
- Give students repeated chances to practice healthy eating.
- Make nutrition education activities fun.
- Involve teachers, administrators, families, community leaders, and students in delivering strong, consistent messages about healthy eating as part of a coordinated school health program.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The guidelines include seven recommendations for ensuring a quality school program to promote lifelong healthy eating.

### **1** Policy

Seek input from all members of the school community to develop a coordinated school nutrition policy that promotes healthy eating through classroom lessons and a supportive school environment. The policy should commit the school to

- Provide adequate time for nutrition education.
- Offer healthy, appealing foods (such as fruits, vegetables, and low-fat grain products) wherever food is available and discourage the availability of foods high in fat, sodium, and added sugars (such as soda, candy, and fried chips) on school grounds and as part of fund-raising activities.
- Discourage teachers from using food to discipline or reward students.
- Provide adequate time and space for students to eat meals in a pleasant, safe environment.
- Establish links with professionals who can provide counseling for nutritional problems, refer families to nutrition services, and plan health promotion activities for staff.

## **2** Curriculum

As part of a sequential, comprehensive health education curriculum that begins in preschool and continues through secondary school, implement nutrition education designed to help students adopt healthy eating behaviors. Such education should

- Help students learn specific nutrition-related skills, such as how to plan a healthy meal and compare food labels.
- Ensure that students also learn general health skills, such as how to assess their health habits, set goals for improvement, and resist social pressures to make unhealthy eating choices.

## **3** Instruction

Provide nutrition education through activities that are fun, participatory, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant. These activities should

- Emphasize the positive, appealing aspects of healthy eating rather than the harmful effects of unhealthy eating.
- Present the benefits of healthy eating in the context of what is already important to students.
- Give students many chances to taste foods low in fat, sodium, and added sugars and high in vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

## **4** Program Coordination

Coordinate school food service with nutrition education and with other components of the school health program to reinforce messages about healthy eating.

## **5** Staff Training

Provide staff who are involved in nutrition education with adequate preservice and ongoing in-service training that focuses on teaching strategies for promoting healthy behaviors.

## **6** Family & Community Involvement

Involve family members and the community in supporting and reinforcing nutrition education.

## **7** Evaluation

Regularly evaluate the program's effectiveness in promoting healthy eating and make changes as appropriate.

This brochure and CDC's *Guidelines for School Health Programs to Promote Lifelong Healthy Eating* can be reproduced and adapted without permission. The guidelines are available on the Internet at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/nutguide.htm>. Print copies are available from CDC, Division of Adolescent and School Health, ATTN: Resource Room, 4770 Buford Highway, Mailstop K-32, Atlanta, GA 30341-3717; e-mail: [ccdinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:ccdinfo@cdc.gov); phone: (770) 488-3168; fax: 888-282-7681. CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health also distributes guidelines for school health programs to prevent the spread of AIDS, to prevent tobacco use and addiction, and to promote physical activity.